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ABSTRACT

Factors which function to cool women out of a straightforward, unblocked, and open pursuit of their career choices and life plans were sought in interviews with women in four two-year colleges. The factors were found to be: parents, counselors, uncontrollable circumstances, and the two-year institution. Although the women did not perceive the college as an obstacle or hindrance, it appears that two-year colleges are continuing to perpetuate sex stereotyped curricula, such as secretarial and child study, while impassively discouraging women from entering the male-dominated majors. (DB)

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THE COOLING OUT OF TWO-YEAR COLLEGE WOMEN

JC 740 150

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In 1960, sociologist Burton Clark called attention to what he termed the "cooling out function" in higher education.[1] In his essay Clark noted that "a major problem of democratic society is the inconsistency between encouragement to achieve and the realities of limited opportunity." Clark focused on how two-year colleges in particular serve to sort and sift students desiring equal access and equal opportunity in the higher education system such that nearly fifty percent of these students who enter two-year colleges do not progress beyond them.

Cooling out is the process of letting down hopes gently and unexplosively. It may be, Clark noted, both deliberate and non-deliberate, conscious or unconscious. Moreover, such a cooling out function is essential because it supports the interaction between the philosophy of democratic institutions and the necessity of selectivity.

In the research Dr. Veres and I are presently conducting we have discovered a further dimension of the cooling out function; namely, as it applies to women. Clark's research focued on the part of the democratic ideology which maintains equal access and participation with minimal commitment to social origin as a basis for status. Today we are increasingly aware of the differential treatment of persons based on their sex. How and why does the problem of cooling out arise with regard to women? Let me cite some familiar statistics:

A 1971 report of a Task Force of the Department of HEW mentioned that during high school women earn higher grades and receive higher test scores than men. Of those women who enter college, 41.5 percent attain the bachelor's and first professional degree. Moreover, women earn higher grades than men during college. Thus, women were found to be better risks than men in graduating on time; 15 percent more women than men graduate in four years. Of the women who have a bachelor's degree, 54 percent are in the labor force, and 71 percent of those who have five or more years of higher education are working. More than 90 percent of the women who received doctorates in 1957-58 were employed in 1964, and 79 percent of them had not interrupted their careers in the intervening years. Women who attain the Ph.D. do not let marriage interfere with their productivity; those who are employed fulltime publish slightly more than either men or unmarried women who have taken the Ph.D.[2]

Thus, women clearly profit from education and in some respects probably more than men. Why is it, then, that fewer women enter college, and fewer go on to graduate work, and why is it that fewer women are found in the professions, and at the top levels of management and administration in colleges and other sectors? Why is it that two thirds of them are in teaching, but compose only one percent of school superintendents? Why are the remainder of working women clustered in nursing, secretarial work or social work? I think the answer is remarkably evident: women are cooled out.

Clark sought to explain what the structure and process of cooling out was for the general population of students in two-year colleges.

Our research has focused (in part) on what the structures and processes are by which women in particular are cooled out. Our findings are based on interviews with women in four two-year colleges in central New York State--part of a larger project dealing with the characteristics, perceptions and career determinants of a general population of two-year college students.

Naturally, the interviews did not ask women to list in what specific ways they felt they were being cooled out. (For one reason, because this wouldn't have worked--Clark noted in his essay that a crucial condition of the cooling out process is that "it must be kept reasonably away from public scrutiny and not clearly perceived or understood by prospective clientele."[3])

So instead of approaching the cooling out directly, we were interested in finding out what the women's career aspirations were, who influenced them, what obstacles they foresaw, in what ways counselors were helpful or not helpful, and how they were taking marriage and family into account. But it was in the context of these interview questions that we were struck by the ambivalence, anger, passive resistance and circumscribed and circumspect planning by which women were expressing their futures.

Based on a preliminary analysis of the data collected from these interviews, there appear to be four principal factors which separately and together function to cool women out of a straight-forward, unblocked and open pursuit of their career choices and life plans. These factors are: (1) parents, (2) counselors, (3) uncontrollable circumstances, and (4) the two-year institution.

Before proceeding to describe how these four factors function, it must be recalled that cooling out is inherently a "soft" process. It is designed to minimize stress on both the individual and the institution or others involved. Its features as noted by Clark involve offering substitutes or alternatives, encouraging slow but steady disengagement, amassing "objective" data against the preference, consoling and counseling the person, and stressing the value of many kinds of persons, many kinds of talents other than the preferred choice.[4]

Perhaps one of the most obvious, or at least most written-about, influences on the socialization of women and girls into strictly feminine roles is that of parents. For the women in our sample, parents were most often cited as being opposed to or neutral to the proposed career choice whereas what might be termed "self or others" were cited as being the most helpful in seeking and deciding upon a career choice. Nevertheless, although parents were not overtly cited, they seemed always in the background in all aspects of the career process. This influence was viewed both negatively and positively. Generally a woman sensed it to be a positive influence if she had chosen a career which the parent (most often father) was in or had desired.

The negative aspects, "the cooling out," was most openly or frequently stated by the women who had selected non-traditional careers. For example: A woman who planned on being a psychologist said of her father, "He goes along with it, but in the back of his mind he still thinks girls should be homemakers." Another said, "He thinks it's ok, not really great, but ok. If I were a son it would be different." And another said, "He feels women should get married. He looks at it (her career plans) as if it were a joke."

Mothers tended to be cited less often as the more influential parent. They were depicted as being neutral or passive. For example, "Any thing I want is ok with her." But occasionally the mother emerged as the stronger force positively or negatively. As a "cooler" the mothers were often characterized as not wanting the daughter to go into an "antisocial career" like law, or an "unfeminine career" such as physical education, or a "too different" career such as electrical technician. However, as Dr. Veres will discuss further, mothers who work appear to have a somewhat different effect upon their daughters' careers than do mothers who weren't working or had never worked.

Finally, a significant cooling technique of parents (mainly fathers) was their lack of willingness to finance a daughter's education. Real bitterness emerged in the remarks of those women who were paying their own way because parents refused. On the other hand, a father's willingness to pay was viewed by the daughter as mild-to-strong support and approval of her aspirations.

Regrettably for those of us in counseling and/or student personnel work, we tend to emerge as the real villains, the most effective "coolants," if you will, of women's career aspirations. In general counselors are viewed as either too busy, too bossy, too fixated on college admissions or just incompetent. As one woman put it, "He was a nothing. I might as well have had the janitor."

One is also struck (but it's only an impression) that most of the women had male counselors and that their relationships were generally not satisfactory. Some women cited overt discrimination such as not letting

one woman enroll in industrial arts courses or telling another she was too dumb for college work. A typical response by women to such experiences and to counselors in general is avoidance. This leads one to suspect that at least some of the research on counselor use and effectiveness which concludes that students simply lack information about what sources are available is a figment of a blaming-the-victim syndrome and that women in particular know what is available and they're not buying.

We have labelled the third factor which operates to cool women out "uncontrollable circumstances." The information on this factor emerged when we asked women to answer the question, "What do you think will be the biggest difficulty or obstacle you will face in reaching your career goals?" Their responses can be lumped into three large categories: money, competition and being a woman. Not surprisingly the third category (being a woman) also permeated the other two. For example, obtaining money was viewed as an obstacle if parents refused to pay for further education, if the career chosen were costly, such as medicine, or if obtaining credit were viewed as difficult for a woman in order to start a business.

Competition was not only perceived as a reflection of simple oversupply but can be broken into (1) competition with other women for jobs in the female fields such as teaching or merchandizing, and (2) competition with men in such fields as law, medicine and architecture where femaleness is viewed as a handicap. Not surprisingly, femaleness tended to be cited as an obstacle more often by women planning non-traditional fields.

Finally, the fourth factor to be considered is the educational institution. We did not ask students questions specifically targeted

at their perceptions of the institutions. Students' comments, however, substantiate Clark's original observations concerning the dual role of the two-year college. That is to say, the women in our sample did not seem to perceive the college in which they were enrolled as an obstacle or a hindrance. Quite the contrary, they seemed to view it as the means by which their futures would be accomplished or at least a first step would be taken. But, on the other hand, as researchers we perceived striking confirmation of Clark's selectivity process; namely, that the two-year collegers are continuing to perpetuate, if only passively, sex stereotyped curricula such as secretarial and child study while at the same time impassively, and even unconsciously, discouraging women from entering the male dominated majors. To be sure, the college personnel often confess bewilderment that more women are not enrolling in such fields as engineering tech., food processing or animal science, but they have yet to view their role as demanding anything more than unlocking the door. In short, we have not perceived college personnel in the two-year colleges attempting aggressively or creatively to find ways to encourage, attract and promote women's entrance and completion of traditionally male fields. Thus, if one considers the impact of 18 years of sex-role socialization of the sort we have described above, the effect of such behavior or non-behavior on the part of two-year colleges is clearly to cool women out of other than female majors and courses of study. Furthermore, it is a process so gentle, so unconscious as to be imperceptible to the female students, thereby fulfilling a basic requirement of the cooling out function.

This has been in many ways a pessimistic analysis of the future for women attending two-year colleges. Yet I would like to end on a note of optimism. If it is true that a key to the effectiveness of the cooling out function is its hiddenness, then the research efforts of recent date, including this one, to reveal the subtle and not so subtle sex discrimination to which women are subjected and the efforts legal, educational and social to correct that discrimination can by the fact of revelation alone begin to cause the cooling out function to wither. Those women who are now electing to seek non-traditional (and even traditional) careers are already more aware of the effects of the four factors we have discussed. With regard to their parents, some are openly seeing their fathers as male chauvinists and their mothers as old-fashioned. With regard to counselors women are actively avoiding non-supportive counselors and avidly seeking those who can help them become what they have chosen--even welcoming, in this context, the "objective facts" which may be obstacles to success. And with regard to the uncontrollable circumstances of being female, of having to pay one's own way and fight with sisters and mothers for the right to a choice and a career, these things are bing assessed more openly and objectively. Finally, with regard to the educational institution, women are increasingly able to use it for what it is overtly designed to do--provide students, both women and men, with an open and equitable means to opportunity in our society. As counselors and educators, dare we fail to be as clear-sighted and tough-minded as these women, who desire so much to see their futures become realities?

Notes

[1] American Journal of Sociology, Vol. LXV, No. 6 (May 1960), 569-576.

[2] As cited in Harrington, Student Personnel Work in Urban College, 1974.

[3] Clark, op. cit.

[4] Clark, op. cit.

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